

Chapter III

The Founding of St. Philomena

In the early 1830's, the Catholic community in Stonelick Valley and its environs grew steadily. Occasional visits by traveling priests, bringing the sacraments, were by no means the limits of their spiritual lives. They met on Sunday mornings, Holy Days, and other times, especially during Lent, in the homes of various members of the community. In the period from 1835 to 1837, meetings were held in the homes of John Cline, Joseph Gomien, Francis Gerard, Louis Bartell, Francis Drone, and John Rapp. Mounting desire for the organization of a regularly constituted parish resulted in further appeals to the Diocese. The successor to Bishop Fenwick, Archbishop John Baptist Purcell, looked with increasing favor upon those requests.

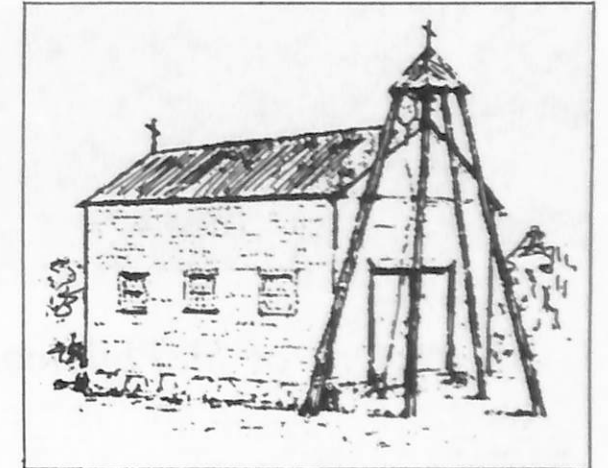
There were several reasons for this positive response, one rooted in fact, the other in conjecture. The factual reason was that the Archbishop saw a large geographical void in the map of the Archdiocese. St. Martin's, established in 1830 in Brown County, north and east of Fayetteville, was separated from the most easterly parishes of Cincinnati by many miles. It would be very desirable to have a Catholic church to serve the faithful in the area between the two.

The conjectural reason was related to the strongly French character of the community. It was likely that financial support for the new parish might be found, at least in part, through ties to the French homeland, both congregational and diocesan.

In 1835, the Archdiocese commissioned Amos Hill to purchase one acre of land, assessed as a tax penalty against a plot of some 20 acres, situated on the bank of Stonelick Creek, for the amount of the penalty: 49 cents and 3 mills! Thus, the parish was organized, and over the next four years, parishioners constructed a log church on the site. Accustomed to labor of this sort, the parishioners, with care and love, gave of the strength of their backs and the skills of their hands, as time and weather permitted. Items and materials they could not manufacture themselves, window glass, hardware, candlesticks, altar furnishings and a bell, were purchased for a total of approximately \$50.00. This sum was donated, significantly, by the Bishop of Paris, France.

There was no steeple. The bell was hung on a structure supported by "four great poles," cut from native timber. Glass was expensive and the new church, therefore, had only half windows. The building's dimensions are not accurately known, but estimates place its size at about 24 feet by 36 feet. In 1839, when complete enough for services, the parish of St. Philomena was officially housed in this sturdy, if humble, structure.

The first pastors were both natives of France. Rev. Claude Gacon, serving as a missionary in the "American Wilderness" and then Rev. William Chemoyl, similarly assigned, were designated by Archbishop Purcell for pastoral duties at St. Philomena.



An unknown artist's drawing of the original church clearly shows the "four great poles."

There is conflict in the records concerning the proper spelling of these early pastors' names. "Gacon" may be "Gascon" and "Chemoyl" may be Schyomal. It matters little. The memory of these pioneer missionaries is forever gratefully enshrined in the history of St. Philomena.

There is also uncertainty about the exact location of the historic building. Records indicate that it was built "on the southside of Stonelick Creek about two miles above its mouth." That description would place it on the opposite side of the creek from the present structure and the two cemeteries. The location and age of the old cemetery, and the topography of the area, make that conclusion unlikely. Later descriptions of the location of subsequent church buildings add to the mystery. But there is no uncertainty about its existence and its influence upon the history of Catholicism in Clermont County. The new parish was formally consecrated in 1840 in a ceremony presided over by the Bishop of New Orleans, Rev. Anthony Blanc.

The first Board of Trustees included John Cline, Francis Drone, Louis Bartell, and Louis Christman. The congregation numbered an even 100 souls at the time of organization. Surnames in the original parish rolls include some found among the active parishioners 150 years later. Original families were: "Cline, Bartell, Morgantulor, Gerard, Drone, Rapp, Yeager, Gros, Christman, Iuen, Roselott, Reno, Odenville, Gomien, Good, Snell, and Schunter." There is, in these records too, some uncertainty about proper spelling.

The name of the patron saint of the parish is likewise of controversial spelling. This question was the subject of an article by Tom Fortney, "The Mystery of St. Philomena", which yields some other interesting, historical sidelights.

How and why St. Philomena was chosen as patron saint of the new parish is a greater mystery. There is no mention of the reason to be found in any of the records. Was it the choice of the leaders of the founding congregation? Was it a diocesan decision? One record, however, is unquestionable. The diocesan document of consecration, written in Latin, clearly establishes that St. Philomena is, in fact, the model and patron of the parish. Appendix I contains more information about this little-known saint.

And so, parish life began. Records establish the first burial from the parish was that of Margaret Bartell, in 1839. The first baptisms were those of John Rapp and Leona Bartell in 1849.

The parish house, used as the pastor's residence, burned in 1845 and was replaced.

The third pastor, Father Baumgardner, succeeded Father Chemoyl. In 1850, Father Baumgardner was succeeded by Father Navarron, who had a significant influence upon the history of the parish, as described in later chapters.